

Reflections: Musings on Mirrors by Sian Charlton

As a volunteer, I have been asked more than once what my favourite item in the House of Life is where I am usually stationed. I love the collars, the travertine bowls and particularly the flint knives, but by far my favourite item is one which is frequently misidentified by young visitors as a pizza cutter but is actually a mirror. I was drawn to it and did not quite know why so examined my thinking. Firstly – it bears a striking resemblance in form to mirrors I have studied from the pre-Roman Iron age in Britain, proving that a sensible design is likely to be generated independently in more than one place. The mirror below left (photo 1) is from the House of Life, whilst on the right hand (photo 2) is an impression of a typical "Celtic" Iron Age mirror.



Bronze mirror with a handle topped with a Hathor-head



A typical Iron Age mirror - Artwork, author

Our mirror from the House of Life - Photograph, author

However, it goes deeper than that. Prendergast (2003) wrote:

“Mirrors are meaningless until someone looks into them. Thus, the history of the mirror is actually the history of looking and what we perceive about these magical surfaces can tell us a great deal about ourselves.” (Introduction)

It is clear that over time, mirrors have performed more than one function. Predominantly today, most people use mirrors to view their own faces and bodies. In the past the usage of mirrors may have been more nuanced, which will be discussed later.

In our current era we have a great variety of ways to view ourselves and we do so frequently. Indeed, many people examine their faces so often and with such critical scrutiny that this can cause great insecurity about body image. On a normal day, the face is examined in the bathroom mirror whilst brushing one's teeth. Clothing is adjusted in a full-length mirror, make up applied in a makeup mirror and the face glimpsed in the car

in the rear-view mirror. At work, most bathrooms have mirrors and failing that, there is always the reverse camera on the ubiquitous mobile phone. On social occasions, selfies are taken. Frequently several are taken, examined, judged and the winner uploaded to social media, and the others unceremoniously deleted.

Compare this with the experiences of ancient peoples. Back through the mists of time, whilst an early mirror was found dating back to 8000 years ago at Catal Hoyuk in modern day Turkey (Enoch, 2005), the majority of ordinary people in the world at that time and for many years thereafter would only ever have caught glimpses of themselves in pools, or maybe bowls of still water. Compare the frequency and quality of the viewing of one's own image then and now. Nowadays, we are familiar with every hair and pore of our faces. Back in time it was highly likely that one was far more acquainted with the faces of others than of one's own. This difference must have had a profound effect on the sense of self although this difference is impossible to prove or quantify.

Ancient mirrors offer a fascinating glimpse into the ingenuity, skills and beliefs of the people who used and created them. As Jay Enoch, an optometry researcher, recounts in his fascinating 2006 paper:

“The earliest known manufactured mirrors (approximately 8000 years old) have been found in Anatolia (south central modern-day Turkey). These were made from obsidian (volcanic glass), had a convex surface and remarkably good optical quality.”

In Egypt, mirrors made from polished copper or silver were known as early as the Old Kingdom (Strouhal, 1992). Thought by some to be associated more with women than men, they were thought to demonstrate a certain degree of status (Szpakowska, 2008).

As with many extremely ancient artefacts, it is not known how these mirrors were used at this time. Looking back with today's perspective, one would assume it would be for grooming oneself, but this may not be the whole story.

“The mirror has proven to be a useful medium to bridge the gap between the sacred and the profane realms over a great span of time, space and cultures” (Bur, 2020)

Mirrors are liminal objects. They display an image of what is real, yet the image itself as somehow less than real. This liminality in its numinousness has opened the way for mirrors to be regarded as somewhat magical. As Bur continues:

“Mirror images can work to assist humans in making contact with the divine”

From the Mirror of Erised in Harry Potter to the arcane scrying mirrors of the Middle Ages, mirrors have clearly been considered as for more than personal grooming. Think further of the many horror films in which unwanted visitors often appear over one's shoulder when looking in the mirror; and the generations of children who have played

with fire by chanting “Bloody Mary” in the school bathroom mirror, in an attempt to summon an unknown entity.



An obsidian scrying mirror - Picture, author.

What is fascinating and thought-provoking about mirrors, including our lovely example in the House of Life, is summed up succinctly by Prendergast (2003):

“As human beings we use mirrors to reflect our own contradicting natures. On one hand, we want to see things as they really are and on the other, we want to delve into the mysteries of life.”

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